

# On the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

Moses Mendelssohn

*Translated by James Schmidt*

*Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) was one of the most important figures in the Berlin Enlightenment. Born in 1729 in the Dessau ghetto, he came to Berlin in 1743, embarked on a study of the works of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, published a number of highly regarded works, entered into a lifelong friendship with Lessing, and—at the end of his life—was Jacobi’s antagonist in the “Pantheism Controversy.”*

*The essay translated here had its origins in a lecture delivered before the Wednesday Society on 16 May 1784 near the end of the series of discussions sparked by Möhsen’s lecture of the previous December. It was the only one of the contributions to the debate to be published in the Berlinische Monatsschrift and may be regarded as an attempt to summarize the main concerns that arose in the course of those discussions.*

The words *enlightenment*, *culture*, and *education* are newcomers to our language.<sup>1</sup> They currently belong only to literary discourse. The masses scarcely understand them. Does this prove that these things are also new to us? I believe not. One says of a certain people that they have no specific word for “virtue,” or none for “superstition,” and yet one may justly attribute a not insignificant measure of both to them.

Linguistic usage, which seems to want to create a distinction between these synonymous words, still has not had the time to establish their boundaries. Education, culture, and enlightenment are modifications of social life, the effects of the industry and efforts of men to better their social conditions.

The more the social conditions of a people are brought, through art and industry, into harmony with the destiny of man,<sup>2</sup> the more education this people has.

Education is composed of culture and enlightenment. Culture appears to be more oriented toward practical matters: (objectively) toward goodness, refinement, and beauty in the arts and social mores; (subjectively) toward

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facility, diligence, and dexterity in the arts and inclinations, dispositions, and habits in social mores. The more these correspond in a people with the destiny of man, the more culture will be attributed to them, just as a piece of land is said to be more cultured and cultivated, the more it is brought, through the industry of men, to the state where it produces things that are useful to men. Enlightenment, in contrast, seems to be more related to theoretical matters: to (objective) rational knowledge and to (subjective) facility in rational reflection about matters of human life, according to their importance and influence on the destiny of man.<sup>3</sup>

I posit, at all times, *the destiny of man as the measure and goal of all our striving and efforts*, as a point on which we must set our eyes, if we do not wish to lose our way.

A language attains enlightenment through the sciences and attains culture through social intercourse, poetry, and eloquence. Through the former it becomes better suited for theoretical usages, through the latter for practical usages. Both together make it an educated language.

Superficial culture is called "polish" [*Politur*]. Hail the nation, whose "polish" is the consequence of culture and enlightenment, whose external splendor and elegance have a foundation of internal, genuine truth!

Enlightenment is related to culture as theory to practice, as knowledge to ethics, as criticism to virtuosity. Regarded (objectively) in and for themselves, they stand in the closest connection, although subjectively they very often are separated.

One can say: Nürnbergers have more culture, Berliners more enlightenment; the French more culture, the English more enlightenment; the Chinese much culture and little enlightenment. The Greeks had both culture and enlightenment. They were an educated nation, just as their language is an educated language. Overall, the language of a people is the best indicator of its education, of culture as well as of enlightenment, in both breadth and intensity.

Further, the destiny of man can be divided into (1) the destiny of man *as man* and (2) the destiny of man *as citizen*.

With regard to culture these two coincide; for all practical perfection has value only in relation to social life and so must correspond only to the destiny of man as a member of society. Man *as man* needs no culture: but he needs enlightenment.

Status and vocation in civil life determine each member's duties and rights, and accordingly require different abilities and skills, different inclinations, dispositions, social mores and customs, a different culture and polish. The more these correspond, throughout all the estates, with their vocations—that is, with their respective destinies as members of society—the more culture the nation possesses.

Each individual also requires, according to his status and vocation, dif-

ferent theoretical insights and different skills to attain them—a different degree of enlightenment. The enlightenment that is concerned with man *as man* is universal, without distinction of status; the enlightenment of man *as citizen* changes according to status and vocation. The destiny of man remains as always the measure and goal of these efforts.

Accordingly, the enlightenment of a nation is proportional to (1) the amount of knowledge, (2) its importance—that is, its relation to the destiny (a) of man and (b) of the citizen, (3) its dissemination through all estates, (4) its accord with their vocations. Thus the degree of a people's enlightenment is determined according to an at least fourfold relationship, whose members are in part once again composed out of simpler relations of members.

The enlightenment of man can come into conflict with the enlightenment of the citizen. Certain truths that are useful to men, as men, can at times be harmful to them as citizens. The following needs to be considered here. The collision can arise between the (1) essential or (2) accidental destinies of man and the (3) essential or (4) accidental destinies of citizens.

In the absence of the essential destiny of man, man sinks to the level of the beast; without the unessential destiny he is no longer good and splendid as a creature.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of the essential destiny of man as citizen, the constitution of the state ceases to exist; without the unessential destiny it no longer remains the same in some ancillary relationships.

Unfortunate is the state that must confess that for it the essential destiny of man is not in harmony with the essential destiny of its citizens, in which the enlightenment that is indispensable to man cannot be disseminated through all the estates of the realm without risking the destruction of the constitution. Here philosophy lays its hand on its mouth! Here necessity may prescribe laws, or rather forge the fetters, that are applied to mankind, to force them down, and hold them under the yoke!

However, if the unessential destiny of man comes into conflict with the essential or unessential destiny of the citizen, rules must be established according to which exceptions are made and cases of collisions decided.

If the essential destiny of man has unfortunately been brought into conflict with his unessential destiny, if certain useful and—for mankind—adorned truths may not be disseminated without destroying prevailing religious and moral tenets, the virtue-loving bearer of enlightenment will proceed with prudence and discretion and endure prejudice rather than drive away the truth that is so closely intertwined with it.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this maxim has become the bulwark of hypocrisy, and we have it to thank for so many centuries of barbarism and superstition. Whenever one has desired to apprehend the crime, it sought refuge in the sanctuary. Nevertheless, the friend of mankind must defer to these considerations, even in the most enlightened times. It is difficult, but not impossible, to find the boundary that separates use from misuse.

The more noble a thing is in its perfection, says a Hebrew writer, the more ghastly it is in its decay.<sup>6</sup> A rotted piece of wood is not as ugly as a decayed flower; and this is not as disgusting as a decomposed animal; and this, again, is not as gruesome as man in his decay. So it is also with culture and enlightenment. The more noble in their bloom, the more hideous in their decay and destruction.

The misuse of enlightenment weakens the moral sentiment and leads to hard-heartedness, egoism, irreligion, and anarchy. Misuse of culture produces luxury, hypocrisy, weakness, superstition, and slavery.

Where enlightenment and culture go forward in step, they are together the best shield against corruption. In their manner of destruction they are directly opposed to one another.

The education of a nation, which according to the foregoing clarification of terms is composed of culture and enlightenment, will therefore be far less subject to corruption.

An educated nation knows of no other danger than an excess of national happiness, which, like the most perfect health of the human body, can in itself be called an illness, or the transition to an illness. A nation that through education has come to the highest peak of national happiness is just for that reason in danger of collapse, because it can climb no higher.—But this leads us too far from the question at hand.

## NOTES

1. The three terms Mendelssohn employs create problems for the translator since, as he himself goes on to note, the contemporary reader could well regard them as synonymous. *Bildung* is a particularly difficult term, capable of being translated as "culture," "development," "formation," or "education." I have chosen the latter to preserve the contrast with *Kultur*, but the reader should bear in mind that the term has a wider range of meanings than the English term: to possess "*Bildung*" is to be educated, cultured, and distinguished by a "proper" upbringing.—TRANS.

2. Mendelssohn appropriated the concept "destiny of man" (*Bestimmung des Menschen*) from a book by Johann Joachim Spalding, a fellow member of the Wednesday Society, *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen* (first published in 1748). Mendelssohn's most comprehensive discussion of Spalding's concept is to be found in his *Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffende*, an essay he published along with his friend Thomas Abbt's *Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen* in 1763. In notes to this edition, Mendelssohn pointed to an ambiguity in the German *Bestimmung*, noting that the word connotes both "determination" (the "establishment of one predicate from among the many that could belong to a subject") and "destination" ("the establishment of a goal, to which something serves as a means"). Mendelssohn suggested that "*Bestimmung*" should be reserved for "determination," while the sense of "destination" is better captured by the German *Beruf* ("calling" or "vocation") (Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6/1:35).—TRANS.

3. Mendelssohn gave an even pithier formulation of the distinction between *Aufklärung* and *Kultur* in his letter to August v. Hennings of 27 November 1784: "*Aufklärung* is concerned only with the theoretical, with knowledge, with the elimination of prejudices; *Kultur* is concerned with morality, sociality, art, with things done and things not done." Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* 13:234.—TRANS.

4. Mendelssohn's distinction between the "essential" destiny of man and the "unessential" [*außerwesentlichen*] or "accidental" [*zufälligen*] destinies of man is derived from Christian Wolff's ontology. As Mendelssohn explained in his letter to v. Hennings, "The essential destiny of man is a matter of *existence* [*Daseyn*], the unessential destiny is a matter of *improvement* [*Besserseyn*]." Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* 13:236.—TRANS.

5. This point was further developed by Mendelssohn in a subsequent essay, "Soll man der einreissenden Schwärmerey durch Satyre oder durch äussere Verbindung entgegenarbeiten?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 5 (February 1785): 133–137 (*Gesammelte Schriften* 6/1:139–141). Here he argued, "Nothing is more opposed to the true good of mankind than this sham enlightenment [*Afteraufklärung*], where everyone mouths a hackneyed wisdom, from which the spirit has already long vanished; where everyone ridicules prejudices, without distinguishing what is true in them from what is false." —TRANS.

6. In the notes to the critical edition of Mendelssohn's works, Alexander Altmann suggests that Mendelssohn might be referring to the tractate *Yadayim* (IV.6), one of the parts of the Talmud: "The level of defilement corresponds to the level of esteem." (See Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6/1:240.)—TRANS.